

Hobson's Choice

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A broken body lay in the middle of a field, flung from an escape pod in a sprawl of magenta and silver. The setting sun brought out highlights in tangled, matted, overlong silver hair.

The man lived, but not for long. His injuries wouldn't kill him; instincts deeper than sentience, acting on a impulse toward self-preservation in the absence of a self, had protected him from the worst of the fall. But one look at his empty blue eyes, and it would be obvious that there was no intelligence there. Helpless as an infant, his mind and intellect shattered beyond recovery, the man would be easy prey for scavengers at night.

He didn't know that. He didn't know anything, except that he hurt, and no one was stopping the hurt, no one was caring for him. Mindless whimpering noises came from his throat, a universal signal of an animal in distress. If the scavengers hadn't known about him before, they did now.

As the last of the light started to slip below the horizon, heralding the helpless man's coming death, a swirl of energy became visible against the twilight, coalescing around the man's head in a sparkle of lights.

—

Magneto awakened in his old laboratory in the Savage Land, the place where he'd created his mutants, with a profound sense of disorientation. He recognized where he was; he could see it. But in the first place, his laboratory had been destroyed, and in the second, his magnetic senses told him an entirely different story. The absence of the geomagnetic field he felt told him that, as far as his senses could tell, he was nowhere at all.

He sat up. He was lying on a cot in the laboratory, wearing his more familiar blood-red armor rather than the beige worksuit and exoskeletal devices he had worn when he was here. His access to his power was gone entirely-- he couldn't even sense his own magnetic field. And a being of unearthly, angelic beauty, androgynous and almost glowing, was sitting across from him, smiling slightly.

"Who are you?" he demanded. "What have you done to me?"

"So you don't recognize me, Father?" the angelic being said, still smiling. "I thought you might not. As for what I have done, for the moment I've saved your life. It remains to be seen whether you'll choose to stay saved."

"Why can't I sense the magnetic fields? What have you done to my powers?"

"Nothing," the being said mildly. "Your powers are intact. The mind that operates them, unfortunately, is less so." It sighed slightly. "In this time and place, your mind is, more or less, your own. The damage is still there, but there was enough of you left that here and now you can be a whole person. The connections to your body are a hopeless mess, though, and it's your body that channels and controls magnetic energy. No body, no powers. I'm afraid you're far too hopelessly corporeal for it to be otherwise."

Magneto stared at the being. "What are you saying? My mind... is damaged? My body isn't here? Then where is it?"

"Where is a silly question," the being said. "It's lying in a heap in a field in South America, being protected from scavengers by my power while we have this chat. But the frame of reference to describe its location is entirely different from the frame of reference needed to describe where you are. In short, you're not in a where, you just are."

"Return me to it. Now."

"You don't want that."

"You have no right to keep me here."

"On the contrary, I've every right. A life for a life. Doesn't the child owe the father care in his infirmity?"

That was the second time the being had called Magneto its father. Its riddles suddenly clicked together. He was on the Astral Plane, being held in a mindscape created by the being. He had no idea what his body was doing in South America, or what the being meant by his infirmity, but a cold chill ran down his noncorporeal spine as he realized who it was, who it had to be.

"Alpha," he said, suddenly very much afraid.

"So you do recognize me," Alpha said, sounding pleased. "I hoped you would."

"Is this about vengeance, Alpha? Have you come for another pound of flesh?" Magneto asked bitterly.

Alpha blinked at him. "You do realize that we're talking past each other," he said. "You are hearing only what you think you should be hearing, no more. Mightn't you try actually listening? Or is the almighty Master of Magnetism too superior to listen to anyone?"

There was no bitterness, no sarcasm in the tone. Alpha's voice-- alien and ethereal, reminding him of bells-- was calm and matter-of-fact. "The last time I saw you, it was the last thing I saw in my right mind for months. Do you wonder that I might think you intended me harm?"

"I don't wonder at all," Alpha said pleasantly. "I know exactly what you think. Your mind might be a bit of a puzzle for the telepaths of this world, but it's an open book to me." He smiled. "Feel perfectly free to worry and be defensive; it won't bother me. But it's something of an unnecessary expenditure of energy on your part. If I intend to harm you, I will, and there's really not much you can do about it."

"Don't toy with me, Alpha. Do whatever it is you've come to do and get it over with."

"Gladly," Alpha said, and stood. Magneto tensed, expecting anything. Without his powers he had no way to fight Alpha off, and realistically, they wouldn't have done him much good if he'd had them. Alpha had been awesomely powerful when he'd transformed Magneto into an infant, and if he'd kept evolving at the same fantastic rate, who knew what he might be now?

"I've come," Alpha said, "to offer you a choice. Magneto must die. The choice is whether or not you die as well."

Magneto stared at him. "What are you talking about? I am Magneto."

"Are you? Or are you Erik Lehnsherr? Or are you Magnus? Or are you prisoner 1211? Are you the Creator, are you Michael Xavier, are you exhibit 307? Which is you?"

"What does it matter? I don't see how the statement 'Magneto must die' allows any room for me to live. Unless you're talking about faking my death, and since you know perfectly well I'd gladly fake my own death if it meant I could keep fighting, that can't be what you mean..."

"What if the choice was that you must stop fighting?"

"And stop trying to protect mutantkind? No." Magneto shook his head. "I won't pretend that I don't want to live. But I won't buy my life at the price of my people's. If I were condemned to live, without power or ability to save my kind, in a world where the horrors of my

childhood will consume them, and I could do nothing but watch... that would be hell. I would rather be dead."

"That isn't what you chose last time."

The old anguish, the guilt at having survived, and the things he'd done to win that survival, rose up and choked him. "No, you're right. That isn't what I chose last time. And that is why I would choose it this time." He shook his head again. "I am not strong enough to willingly endure that twice in one lifetime."

"Perhaps you underestimate your own strength."

"I think it more likely that I overestimate it. The fact that I ever believed for a moment I could change the world, I could prevent any of it, strikes me as a gross overestimation. I should have known better."

"So, if I sent you back, hale and healthy, you would just kill yourself? It sounds to me like you're saying that you don't want to live if there's nothing you can do to save your people, and that you don't believe there is anything you can do to save your people. Should I put you out of your misery right now?"

"I can't very well stop you, can I?"

"No. Assume for the moment the choice is yours, Magneto. I can do anything I want to, but what I want to do is give you the choice. Is this conversation at an end? Is the only choice you see death? Because you're dying already, you realize. All I have to do is not act to save you, and you will have death, if you want it."

"I don't want it," he said hoarsely. He got to his feet and paced. "There are... times... when I might have welcomed it. When I discovered that I had not, in fact, died in space when I had expected it, but most of my followers had... the only thing that kept me going was the belief that I'd been spared for a reason, that it was my mission to save my people and for that I must live. I have grown discouraged, and tired, at times... but no. I will not willingly yield anything to death. I will not accept a bargain that gives me life but denies me the ability to fight... but if I am allowed to keep fighting, however futile it may be, I want to live. Is that what you want? Is that the choice I'm expected to make?"

"You don't know what the parameters are yet. You don't understand what I'm offering you."

"You haven't explained. I'm not a hyper-evolved telepath."

Alpha laughed. "You're very different than I remembered."

"Am I?"

"When I first awakened," Alpha said, "I thought you were a god. Perhaps all children think of their fathers as such. As I transformed and my mental capacities grew, I began to question you, but I still thought you were near-infallible until I touched your mind." He shook his head. "Perhaps memory faults me, or perhaps it was only the contrast. I saw venality, cruelty, lust for power and a total lack of interest in me except as a tool you could dominate. I felt angry and

betrayed, as I suppose every child must when he realizes his father has feet of clay. So I transformed you-- believing that I was being entirely fair and just, that I, the superevolved being, was above all such emotions so petty as revenge for childhood ideals betrayed. I made you an infant, an innocent being as I had been innocent before you transformed me, and did not see that my motive was revenge. I'd only just been born, after all. Vast intelligence, but little wisdom."

"I never doubted for a moment that your motive was revenge. You allowed me to remember what I had been." Magneto faced his creation, staring hard into Alpha's oversized eyes. "I don't remember it very well, but what I do remember comes back to me in nightmares. I was completely helpless in the hands of people I knew to be my enemies, without any ability to protect myself, without even so much as the ability to hide my terror. I couldn't remember exactly how, but I knew I had once been adult and powerful myself, and now that was taken from me and I couldn't remember why. If you had truly wanted me to return to a state of innocence, you wouldn't have let me remember that much."

"You weren't supposed to. I underestimated the strength of your mind."

Magneto thought of MacTaggert's attempt to brainwash him. "You were not the only one."

"No, probably not." Alpha shrugged. "It doesn't matter. I was a child, reacting like a child. You weren't the god I thought you, and I saw that as betrayal. Now I am a god myself, and I see you more clearly. You wanted power, not just for your personal satisfaction-- though that aspect existed-- but to deny the nightmare you saw. You were willing to sell your soul, to roll in the same filth as those you despised, to save the innocent. You were a fool-- you cannot do good with such a horribly flawed tool. But you were a brave and noble fool, and you created me to try to save the world. Of course I was only a tool to you. How could it be otherwise? Everyone was a tool to you, most especially you yourself."

"So you are saying you were wrong to make me an infant?"

"Oh no, no. Not at all. It was a reasonable plan. You see, you have the soul of a good man-- with flaws, yes, but fundamentally what you want is to protect people. It's your reason for existence. The trouble is that your history has scarred you. The Nazis imprinted you forever with the idea that power means ruthlessness and dictatorial control. You can't conceive of power that doesn't involve you ordering everyone else around, and you can't conceive of protecting the innocent without power. So, with the best of intentions, you have become hard, ruthless and cruel. You truly believe that the only way to save your people is to beat everyone else into submission."

"That is the only way to save them," Magneto said harshly. "Don't judge me, Alpha. You may have godlike powers, but the rest of us have limits, and must work within them. I can't make humanity accept mutantkind and stop fearing us--"

"You may be a large reason for that fear."

That stung, because it was probably true. "I may have been a

catalyst. But the Sentinels program began before my career as a terrorist. Apocalypse would have launched his genocidal attacks on humanity whatever I did, and humanity would still have feared us enough to kill. My own _wife_ ran from me in terror the first time she saw my power."

"No. The first time your wife saw your power, you were saving her life and your own as a building collapsed on top of you, and she clung to you as if she believed you were a savior, that you could protect her and your daughter. The second time she saw your power, you had just murdered so many innocent people that even you aren't certain how many you killed. _That_ was when she ran."

Alpha was, strictly speaking, correct. Magda hadn't run the _first_ time. But she couldn't have. If she had run she would have died. It didn't count. Magneto tried another tactic, feeling an increasing sense of desperation. He had to make Alpha understand why he had done these things. "Their fear is understandable, I didn't say it wasn't. Were I human, I'd probably share it. We are far more powerful than they, and their evolutionary successors. For the sake of their species' supremacy, they have to try to kill us-- and so for the sake of our survival we must take their supremacy from them. I _don't_ want them dead, Alpha. But they can't be permitted to hound and kill us, and their numerical superiority gives them the advantage, despite our power. I don't want it to be this way, but our biology dictates that we must fight."

Alpha nodded. "You see? You've seen how bankrupt that particular reasoning is time and time again, and yet you keep falling back on it. No one has shown you a better way that actually works, it's true, but it's also a failure of your own imagination. You are an inherently good man with a desperate desire to protect the helpless, but your experience at the hands of the Nazis has convinced you that the only way to do that is to bathe in the blood of your enemies and crush all resistance under your heel." Alpha shrugged. "It happens all the time. People and groups that were tormented and helpless become convinced there's nothing in life but victims and victimizers, and they seek to dominate and control others because they're so insecure about becoming victims. The Germans slaughtered your people because they felt insecure and dominated by forces outside their control, decided it was the fault of the different, and set out to kill you to protect themselves."

"Exactly as humanity will try to do to us!"

"Exactly as you have done to humanity. How many people did you threaten to kill because of the Legacy Virus? Which was invented by a mutant?"

The memory made Magneto uncomfortable. He could no longer quite remember why he'd thought that was a good idea, and it troubled him. Nevertheless, he tried his best to defend it. "If mutants were not so persecuted by the outside world, we could have turned to them for help in solving it. Instead, our people die and they do not care."

"Have you _asked_ a single nonmutant, with the exception of MacTaggart, to help?"

"They wouldn't!"

Alpha nodded again, as if to himself. "I'm sorry to see how accurate my initial assessment was. Magneto, you're insane. Your answers to the last several questions I've asked you indicate that you and reality parted company some time ago." He glided forward and laid his hands on Magneto's arms. Instinctively Magneto jerked away. Alpha dropped his hands, his alien features registering nothing, no disappointment or hurt. "It isn't your fault. Your powers have damaged your mind. You were damaged this way when you created me as well, but that was the result of years of cumulative damage. I healed you when I made you an infant, and for years you were well, showing what you could have been if your powers didn't eat you alive and your history didn't twist you. But one near-death experience that decreases your body's resistance to your own power, dramatically increasing the power and the damage it does, and a handful of months later you are worse than you were when you created me."

"I am not insane, Alpha."

"I don't expect you to agree with me, Magneto. Simply understand that it is what I believe, and I feel obligated to do something about it."

"Then do it. Why are you hesitating?"

"I'm not. I'm explaining." Alpha shook his head. "Making you an infant could have saved you. But the people I thought were good, in my infantile view of the universe, didn't take you in and raise you as if they were giving you the second chance I intended for you. They put you in a cell, gave you blocks and toys, and left you to amuse yourself when they weren't playing with your genome. Others were able to hunt you down and use you as a tool. It would have happened all throughout your second childhood if you'd been allowed to have one-- I left you helpless, and a helpless person with power is a terrible thing, because they will be abused and used as a tool, as you did to me. I would not wish that on anyone, not even the man who did it to me."

"So what would you wish on me?" Magneto rasped.

"You're dying, Father. Charles Xavier shredded your mind. Right now your mindless body is lying in a field. Scavengers are nosing at it, though I'm keeping them from hurting it. Your mind doesn't exist at all except through my power, holding you together. If I do nothing, you will die."

"I take it that isn't your intention, though, or you wouldn't have saved me in the first place. So what do you want, Alpha? Stop playing games!"

"I can heal you. The brain damage is extensive, but if I regress you in age again, I can restore your brain to the plasticity that would allow me to repair it. I can knit your mind back together and leave you healthy and sane."

Dread made a leaden weight in his chest. "You would make me an infant again," Magneto said, trying to hide how much he feared that.

"No, no. I told you that was too dangerous. No, you'll be an adult, albeit barely-- a man barely out of adolescence. Physically, you'll

be at your peak; in terms of your power, you'll have a few more years of developing to do-- you're actually a late bloomer genetically, Auschwitz only exacerbated the problem. But you will have power, at close to the full levels you had after Erik the Red undid my work. I'll restore your ability to feel pain when you push too hard, and make the modifications MacTaggart failed at, to enable you to bear higher levels of power without brain damage."

"And what price do you ask for this miracle?" His voice was harsh.

"Your identity." Alpha stared down at him. "I told you Magneto must die. It is your choice whether to die with Magneto or not."

"I still don't understand the question."

"I will take your memories. Most of your knowledge will remain. You'll speak the languages you speak now, have some of your mastery over your power and some of your scientific knowledge. That's all. You won't remember who you are, or anything of your past life. The imprint the Nazis placed on you will at last be erased, and you'll be free to become the man you might have been."

Magneto went cold. "No. I-- no."

"So you would prefer to die?"

"Those are my only choices?" He said it almost pleadingly. "Alpha, I cannot give up my memories. If I were to do that, what was the point to all the suffering I endured?" He stared into his creation's eyes, willing him to understand. "There are people who have been annihilated, their bodies burnt, all who ever knew they existed gone, but for me. Who will remember them if you take my memories? How will I save myself from blind naivete and my people from the consequences of my blindness? The only thing that separates me from Charles is that I know what depths humanity can sink to, and he does not." He shook his head. "You say you can give me a second chance, but you cannot. You can't wash the blood from my hands. But if I forget that I spilled it, and why--"

"Remembering that you spilled it, and why, is what has inured you to doing it again. And again. You feel that if you cannot rationalize what you've done to innocents and your opponents in the name of your cause, you would have to believe yourself as evil as the Nazis were. And you cannot endure that, so you justify. These deaths were necessary. They deserved it. It was the lesser of two evils. And believing that, you see no reason why more deaths might not be necessary, why more opponents might not deserve it. So you kill again, and justify again. If I take away the memory of your justifications, it will not wash the blood from your hands, no. Nothing can. But sooner or later you will be confronted with the past you cannot remember, and you will be told of the blood on your hands. And without the justifications you will be free to react as you would if you didn't have such an investment in justification-- you will react with horror, recognizing the depths you have sunk to, and you will restrain yourself from doing it again." Alpha reached for him again, touching his shoulder gently. Again Magneto pulled away. "I'm sorry for the dead whose memory lives on only in you. But sooner or later the dead are always lost. In two hundred years, those who remember any given human are almost always dead as well. I cannot let

you use that as an excuse."

"Then let me keep my family," Magneto argued desperately. "My memories of my parents and my sister before the Nazis killed them, the things I had in my childhood that were good before I lost it all. Please, surely you can let me have that much."

Alpha shook his head. "I'm sorry. If you remember your family and the love you felt for them, you'll seek them out, and learn how they died. It will fill you with outrage, and begin to twist you once again. The whole point to this exercise is to reset your understanding of the universe. If evil things happen to you after this point and convince you the world is evil, I cannot change that. But I can prevent you from remembering the evil things that happened in your past, and unfortunately, that means eliminating the good as well."

"I should feel outrage! I should be horrified! They were murdered, slaughtered because they believed the universe was a good place, and it wasn't! They didn't protect themselves, and evil consumed them! Is this the fate you intend for me? Am I to go tamely to the slaughter the way my family did, because I don't remember the evils of the universe?" He grabbed Alpha's arms, shaking him. "Take away all the evil in the world, make this a good place where children can grow up in safety and are not buried under the corpses of all that they love, and I will accept what you plan to do to me! But you cannot take away my knowledge of evil in a world dominated by evil, or I will be destroyed as surely as my family was! Is that what you want? Stop fooling yourself that you are offering me a choice-- death as a mindless creature eaten by animals or death as an innocent betrayed by the savagery of humanity, this is a choice? You aren't giving me a second chance, you aren't giving me an opportunity to make amends for my crimes or learn a different path, you are simply condemning me to die! If that's what you want I can't stop you but don't fool yourself that you're performing some great and noble service to the world, or to me-- recognize that this is still about revenge, and admit it!"

Alpha grasped Magneto's elbows. "You are a highly intelligent man. If evil is so prevalent as you think, Magneto, you'll learn of its existence quickly enough. I don't intend to make you stupid, I merely mean to make you innocent again, empty of knowledge of the world good or evil. Your experiences will teach you what the world is. And because I do not believe the world is the horror you think it is, I think you will see far more good than you can see now. But it will be the nature of the world that you learn, as it is now, rather than being shaped by one psychotic aberration in humanity's collective history." He released Magneto. "What happened to you and your people was awful, a horror beyond imagining. But it does not define reality. It defines one very tiny, aberrant, aspect of reality. Since that is the aspect you grew up in, that is all you can see. If I take that away, you will be free to experience other aspects of reality as well."

Magneto shook his head, feeling terribly defeated. Alpha was not listening. The world was a horror, and only the strong survived. If he was reduced to a state of ignorance-- innocence by any other name-- it wouldn't be long before the dangers he would no longer know of consumed him.

It was a bitter trap, especially bitter because he could almost want it. To be free of the burden of knowledge he carried-- no longer to dream of the nightmare of the Holocaust, or the death of his daughter, or the blood on his own hands-- oh, that was seductive. But it would kill him. If he did not understand evil and protect himself from it by taking into himself its strength, if he let himself be a good and innocent man, he would die, and so would the thousands of mutants he'd sworn to protect. Xavier could not help them. Only he could, and Alpha wouldn't allow it. "You will not even admit that what you really want is for me to choose my own destruction," he whispered, turning away. "I created you, Alpha. You could at least do me the honor of being honest with yourself as you kill me."

Alpha sighed. "You still won't see. But I will try to be fair. Accept life under my terms, and I will let you have one thing. One friendship, of your choosing."

Magneto's eyes narrowed, and he turned back to face Alpha. "What do you mean?"

"Choose someone you loved or someone who befriended you. It must be someone still alive. I won't give you the details, but I'll let you remember that person is your friend, and that you can trust them. So choose someone that you think you can trust. Your instincts are for the most part good, and they will still operate-- in general you will be able to tell who means you harm and who doesn't. But I will let you keep one positive relationship from your past."

"And you will not let me remember my enemies?"

"As I said, your instincts are good. You'll figure out who your enemies are, quickly enough."

He closed his eyes. He wasn't even sure why he was going along with this. It would probably end in his death, as he had told Alpha. But he had to grasp at any chance, however small, for life.

Who could he choose, from a life where friends and lovers had betrayed him at every turn? Not his Acolytes. His experience with Cortez had taught him that without his firm hand on the reins, he could trust none of them, not even Paris and Amelia. Not Charles, certainly. Charles would gladly take an innocent Magneto and indoctrinate him in his own cultlike Pollyanna view. Lee? But Lee was human, and a human living an ordinary lifestyle. He did care for her, but the inevitable war between human and mutant would tear them apart, and he didn't want to make her have to choose between betraying her species and betraying a friend.

An image rose to mind of a young woman, a fighter, warrior for Xavier's dream but with the background to understand that perhaps that was not the only way. A woman who had pleaded with him to turn away from his bloodstained path, who had tried to stop him with a kiss. As Magneto, it had been too clear to him that the path of blood was the only one that remained open, and she would not, could not, walk it with him. But if he lost his self, she was the only one he could imagine who could accept him as he had been enough to help him regain what he had lost, without using him or trying to brainwash him. The might-have-been of the relationship he had never had with her still haunted him. Perhaps-- just perhaps he could take something good away from what Alpha planned to do to him, something that could

sustain him for the struggle ahead.

"You choose life?"

God help me. "Yes." He turned to face Alpha. "You know what I have chosen."

"You won't recognize her, per se. But if you meet her, you will remember how you feel toward her."

He nodded. "Where am I going?"

"Your body is in South America. The transformation will leave you ill; I'll see to it that you are rescued." Alpha stepped forward. "You won't remember any of this, I'm afraid." He reached out his hand.

I'll never know that I chose to give up my identity myself. That it's the price I chose to pay for life. So be it. He reached forward and clasped Alpha's hand, as if this devil's bargain was truly his own choice and not the lesser of two evils.

A surge of white power enveloped them, searing through Magneto's senses. He had time to wonder who he would be when he woke up.

End
file.